

Twenty years since the death of Marxist historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin

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Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, the greatest Soviet and Russian Marxist sociologist and historian of the second half of the twentieth century, died of cancer twenty years ago today, on September 18, 1998. He was 61 years old.

*Rogovin's greatest work was accomplished in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR. Beginning in 1992, he began intensive work on what would become a seven-volume history of the revolutionary Marxist opposition, led by Leon Trotsky, to the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR. Covering the years from 1923 to 1940, Rogovin's *Was There an Alternative?* is an unsurpassed work of historical scholarship, indispensable for an understanding of the Stalinist regime and the deep-rooted socialist opposition to its betrayal of the principles and program of the October Revolution. Rogovin documented the immense popularity of Trotsky, even after his exile from the Soviet Union in 1929, and established that the principal purpose of Stalin's bloody terror in the 1930s was the eradication of Trotsky's political influence.*

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Rogovin had been working for many years, albeit under very difficult circumstances, on a sociological analysis of Stalinism. For much of his career, he was a scholar at the Institute of Sociology in Moscow. He entered the discipline of sociology out of a desire to find a setting in which he could study and write about the problem of social stratification in Soviet society. His research focused on inequalities in lifestyles and consumption, the social and political roots of the USSR's problems with labor productivity, and the meaning of social justice.

Rogovin's contributions to sociology, which were published widely in major journals and press outlets, consisted of such titles as, "Justice as a Social-Philosophical and Socio-Economic Category" (1982), "The Human Factor and the Lessons of the Past" (1984), and "On Social Benefits and Privileges" (1989). His open commitment to the defense of equality won him widespread popularity, a fact widely acknowledged in the USSR at the time and even noted by Western scholars.

We publish here two tributes to Vadim Rogovin delivered by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, who worked closely with the great Marxist historian and sociologist between 1992 and 1998. The first was delivered in Moscow in May 1997, on the occasion of Rogovin's sixtieth birthday. The second was delivered in May 2002, also in Moscow, at a memorial meeting marking what would have been Rogovin's sixty-fifth birthday.

It is both a great honor and great pleasure to bring the greetings of the International Committee of the Fourth International and those of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States to Vadim Rogovin on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. That comrades and friends of Vadim have come to Moscow from all over the world on this occasion, demonstrates the immense value that is placed upon his work and life by an international audience of workers, students, and intellectuals who have been inspired and moved by his struggle for historical truth.

I understand that this tribute has been organized by those colleagues and friends of Vadim Rogovin who have worked with him for many years. I am sure that those of you who have had the opportunity and good fortune to work with Vadim appreciate the extraordinary power of his intellect, the astonishing breadth of his knowledge, his seemingly inexhaustible capacity for mental labor, the amazing fluency of his thought, speech and writing, and, even more striking, his physical and moral courage in the face of adversity, the nobility of his character and goodness of his heart. There is not a single person here today—even if there is someone here who perhaps disagrees with certain elements of his work and views—who would deny that Vadim Rogovin is an exceptional human being.

But I cannot help but wonder whether the members of this famous and prestigious institute fully appreciate the significance of the life that we are honoring today. In saying this, I intend no disrespect whatsoever to the members of this institute, many of whom, I understand, are among Vadim's closest friends.

There is a saying with which you are certainly familiar: a prophet is without honor in his own country. This phrase comes to mind as one considers the life-work of Vadim Rogovin, not only as a commentary on the difficulty, complexity, and paradoxes of his position in the intellectual and political life of contemporary Russia, but also because it encapsulates the tragedy of the former Soviet Union and the society that has emerged from its collapse.

For, despite all the convulsive changes that have occurred here over the last decade, one thing has not changed: this remains a country which still cannot acknowledge, let alone pay tribute to, the life-work and thoughts of one of the greatest political and intellectual figures of its history, Lev Davidovitch Trotsky.

Vadim Rogovin is a prophet of historical truth. And like all prophets, he challenges and confronts the society in which he lives with difficult questions that it would prefer to evade or ignore. The great historical question that Vadim has placed before his contemporaries is, "Was there an alternative to Stalinism?" He insists, on the basis of a profound study of Soviet history, that there was: that Stalinism was neither the inevitable nor necessary outcome of the October Revolution, but represented its betrayal and negation.

In referring to Vadim as a prophet, it is not my intention to invoke the image of an austere and pleasure-denying ascetic, indifferent to and detached from the daily cares, concerns and joys of the world in which he lives. No one who knows Vadim could imagine him in a hermit's cave.

Greetings to Vadim Rogovin, May 12, 1997

He is delightfully human, a connoisseur of ice cream and all things beautiful, a fanatical sight-seer, a man who partakes of life with an enthusiastic curiosity, and who loves poetry and the company of colleagues and friends.

But the pursuit of truth is the commanding passion of his life. It is this fundamental element of his intellectual and moral character that makes Vadim Rogovin so exceptional a figure. We live today in a disoriented and distracted world, whose attitude to truth recalls that of Pontius Pilate, who, when told by a certain renowned prisoner that he had come into the world to bear witness unto the truth, replied, rather cynically, "And what is truth?" Pilate wished to suggest that the practical and successful man need not trouble himself with such an abstract problem, and that, at any rate, the definition of truth is a purely personal matter, which changes with the needs of the day. Some 2000 years have passed, but the pragmatic outlook of that Roman bureaucrat still has many adherents. From all quarters we are told that objective truth is a mirage, a burdensome philosophical construction and naïve affectation of Enlightenment thought, with its foolish faith in the power of reason, that man would be better off without.

The most powerful refutation of this contemptuous attitude toward the search for truth is to be found in the fate of the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. In this country we see the horrifying consequences of the suppression of objective truth, which was concentrated in the systematic falsification of history.

As one who lives outside Russia, I can only follow the conditions that exist in this country through the press and with the help of reports that I receive from Russian friends and co-thinkers. Those of you who live in this country are far better informed than I of the present state of affairs in Russia. But whatever your political views may be, as humane and decent people, I am sure you are deeply troubled by the innumerable statistical indices, not to mention visible signs, of economic breakdown and social decay. A tiny fraction of the population is wallowing in obscene wealth of unexplained origins, while the great mass of the people is suffering ever-greater deprivation.

Many explanations of varying plausibility and quality have been given for the present state of affairs, but one thing must by now be clear. When the long-simmering crisis of Soviet society finally erupted in 1985, there was no one to be found who was in a position to understand, let alone provide a solution to, the problems confronting the USSR. It was not only the first secretary of the Communist Party who was overwhelmed and bewildered. Little help was forthcoming from Soviet economists, philosophers, and sociologists. The activities of the politicians and their advisers during the era of Perestroika resembled a game of "Blind Man's Bluff." Programs that were announced with great fanfare on one day, were found to be unworkable on the second day, and forgotten on the third.

What was lacking in those days was any sense of historical perspective. How could a path be found to the future without an objective and honest confrontation with the past? I recall reading in November 1987 Gorbachev's speech on the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Shamefully, Stalin was praised for his contribution to socialism, and, as always, Trotsky was denounced as the arch-enemy of Lenin. The entire speech was a tissue of lies and vulgar distortions. Upon reading this banal and dishonest speech, one could not help but shake one's head and comment with bitter sarcasm: "And it is upon this rotten foundation that Gorbachev plans the renewal of Soviet society!"

A terrible price continues to be paid for the falsification of history and the denial of objective truth.

It is a poignant fact that the year in which we celebrate Vadim's 60th birthday is also the sixtieth anniversary of the most terrible year in the history of the Soviet Union, 1937. The events of that year, which were to have such tragic consequences for the fate of the Soviet Union and the cause of international socialism, also determined the direction of Vadim

Rogovin's intellectual life.

Just three months before Vadim was born, Leon Trotsky replied to the Moscow frame-up trial of Radek, Piatakov and other Old Bolsheviks who had been condemned by Stalin. The Moscow Trials, he proclaimed, arose from the betrayal of socialism by the totalitarian bureaucracy. Every charge made by Vizhinsky against the defendants was a lie. "Be it over our bleaching bones," Trotsky declared, "the truth will triumph."

Vadim Rogovin has dedicated his life to the victory of that truth, in which he believes so passionately.

None of us can predict either the time when or the precise form in which the terrible social and political problems confronting the people of the former Soviet Union will find their solution. In the final analysis, the resolution of this crisis depends not only on events within Russia, but on the unfolding of the class struggle beyond its borders. But we can say with certainty that among the most important intellectual indications that a solution is in the process of being discovered will be the expanding circulation of the books of Vadim Rogovin.

And we can also predict, with the utmost confidence, that the time is not too far off when our friend, colleague, and comrade, Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, will be acknowledged in Russia and throughout the world as not only one of the greatest historians of his age, but also as one of the most honest and principled men of his time.

A Tribute to Vadim Rogovin, May 15, 2002

Today we meet to commemorate what would have been Vadim Rogovin's 65th birthday, and to celebrate the publication of the seventh and final volume of his magnificent historical cycle— Was There an Alternative to Stalinism?, a history of the political struggle against the betrayal of the October Revolution from the founding of the Left Opposition in 1923 to the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940.

There is a profound and moving symbolism in the combination of these events. In observing the 65th anniversary of his birth, we celebrate Vadim's life. In welcoming the publication of the seventh volume of his History, we honor Vadim's work.

Every human life is both finite and infinite. It is finite in its individuality and physical mortality. But it is infinite both as an element of man's collective social being and, on that basis, to the extent that it gives conscious expression to the universal in human experience and thereby transcends the boundaries of finite existence.

There are those who, to use the words of Trotsky, "carry on their shoulders a particle of the fate of mankind." In such people, this precious element of the infinite transcendence finds exceptionally intense expression. Their contribution to mankind's future lives on after them. The legacy of their lives enters into the consciousness of ensuing generations, and becomes the treasured and collective inheritance of all humanity. Such a life was that of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin.

Wherein lay the greatness of Vadim Rogovin? That question can be answered only by placing his life in the context of the times in which he lived—especially, in the context of the last decade of his life, the period of Vadim's greatest intellectual creativity. Much has happened in the former Soviet Union during the past 15 years. Today, it is not my intention to enter into an argument over the nature of the changes in the social and economic structure of post-Soviet society. There are among us, I am sure, many different opinions as to the nature and consequences of these changes. It was Vadim's view, which corresponds to that of the international Trotskyist movement, that the protracted crisis of the Soviet

Stalinist regime was resolved in the late 1980s and 1990s in a manner that was politically reactionary and socially regressive.

But there is one particularly notable feature of the intellectual environment of the last 15 years to which I feel obliged to call attention. Notwithstanding all that has happened since the mid-1980s, there has not emerged from the upheavals of Soviet and post-Soviet society a single political figure who commands international respect, let alone admiration. To the extent that mankind is searching for new and promising ideas, it occurs to no one to look for them in post-Soviet Russia. Virtually all those who have achieved prominence or notoriety have been exposed as mediocrities and rank scoundrels. Who, today, could speak of the "greatness" of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Lebed, Sobchak (some of these names are probably not even remembered) and, excuse me, the present occupant of the Kremlin, without causing his audience to burst out laughing? All of these people were, or are, unconscious instruments of historical and social processes that they neither foresaw nor understood.

I should add that blindness and mediocrity is not an affliction of political life alone. Perhaps I am poorly informed, but I believe that one can say, without serious contradiction, that the cultural life of Russia is as impoverished as its economy. Has there been produced, during the past decade, a single major novel, an important poem, a significant musical composition, or even a cinematic work that is truly worthy of international attention? Against the background of this intellectual and cultural wasteland, the work of Vadim Rogovin stands out all the more as a monumental achievement.

The seven volumes of Vadim's history will endure as a major contribution to not only Russian, but also world literature. "Great history," wrote E. H. Carr "is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illumined by insights into problems of the present." Herein lies the key to understanding the significance of Vadim's works. It was Vadim's preoccupation with the problems of his own time and his concern for mankind's future that compelled him to study, analyze and explain the past. Vadim's ferocious preoccupation with the problem of historical truth was not that of a simple moralist. Rather, it derived from a profound insight into the great problem of the epoch in which he lived—that the universal loss of social perspective, the decline of class consciousness, the all-pervasive political bewilderment and stupefaction of public opinion is the social price paid for decades of Stalinism's lies and falsifications. The destruction of historical consciousness has created a confused and disoriented people, unable to understand the nature of the social and political problems they confront and to discover a progressive solution to the crisis of their society.

What was the task that Vadim set for himself during the last decade of his life? To refute the gross falsification of Trotsky's role in Soviet history; to counter the lie that Stalinism was the necessary and organic product of Marxism and the October Revolution; to answer the claim that there existed no alternative to Stalinism in the USSR. In discussion and in collaboration with the International Committee of the Fourth International, Vadim developed his interpretation of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s as a form of political genocide, directed against the representatives of Marxist politics and culture in the Soviet working class and intelligentsia. Vadim interpreted the terror of the 1930s as a form of civil war, directed by Stalin and his henchmen (Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Beria, Yezhov, Mikoyan and others) against a suppressed but still powerful socialist opposition, whose greatest voice was Lev Davidovich Trotsky.

Underlying this historical analysis was a concept of philosophical profundity. Vadim insisted that the motive force that determined the murderous character of the Stalinist regime was the striving for social privilege—the achievement of material benefits for the few, at the expense of the many. The social policy that found expression in the crimes of Stalin was the promotion and defense, by the bureaucracy that he led, of social inequality. The fundamental contrast between Bolshevism and

Stalinism was precisely this: the historical objective of the former was the achievement of social equality; the goal of the latter was the protection of individual privilege. As Vadim wrote, "Stalin's greed for material things, his craving for limitless luxury in his everyday life were passed on to his descendents up to and including Gorbachev, all of whom, unlike the Bolshevik Old Guard, were unwilling to share physical difficulties and privations with the people."

At the core of Vadim's philosophy of history was an unshakable insistence on the ontological validity of objective truth. The recognition of truth as the correspondence of subjective thought with objective properties and processes of social being, is the essential basis of scientific historical consciousness. This axiom must serve not only as the foundation for the study of the history of the USSR. At issue here is a truly international problem: that of coming to grips with the historical experience and lessons of the 20th century as a whole. It is not only in Russia that this problem demands attention.

In my references to the blighted state of post-Soviet society, I did not mean to suggest that Americans and Europeans are enjoying a flowering of intellectual creativity. The situation beyond the borders of Russia is no less pathetic. In different forms and with varying degrees of intensity, one encounters throughout the world the same disorientation, confusion and ignorance. And, as in Russia, the source of this disorientation is the failure to assimilate and theoretically comprehend the historical events and experiences out of which the present emerged. And how can the experience of the past be assimilated and comprehended when even the factual components of history—especially those related to the October Revolution and its aftermath—are concealed and falsified? That is why the work of Vadim Rogovin is of world significance and has attracted an international audience.

There are periods of history when revolutionary social upheavals shatter old barriers and clear a path for great advances in every sphere of human culture. In the wake of such upheavals, there emerge the geniuses who act as the spokesmen of the new age. They amplify all the progressive impulses of their time and endow them with the most profound, universal, and timeless form.

But there are other, more difficult and painful periods of history, when creative genius must labor in isolation and in opposition. The exceptional figures of such an epoch are not men and women *of their times*, but men and women *against their times*. In this sense, there is a parallel between the life of Trotsky and the life of Rogovin. Had Trotsky died in 1923, he would have certainly lived on in history as one of the major figures of the ascendant Russian Revolution. But it was what he achieved during the last 17 years of his life, between 1923 and 1940—his unyielding struggle against the Stalinist betrayal of world socialism—that ensured Trotsky's historical immortality as the greatest and most important revolutionary thinker and leader of the 20th and perhaps even of the 21st century.

Vadim's greatness, like that of Trotsky, manifested itself in political, intellectual, and moral opposition—in his courageous, principled and indefatigable devotion to historical truth, in an environment made rotten by decades of lies, cynicism, hypocrisy and cowardice. In opposition to the times in which he lived, Vadim Rogovin produced seven volumes that will live in world literature as a moral and intellectual milestone in mankind's reclaiming of its revolutionary heritage.

The seventh volume of Vadim's book is entitled, *The End is the Beginning*. This title might also serve as a fitting epitaph for Vadim himself. Only his physical being left us on September 18, 1998. That which was immortal in Vadim's life and work lives with us and gains in strength from day to day.



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